WE CLAIM:

1. A method of paying bills using a computer, comprising the steps of:

receiving a request to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf of a particular consumer;

selecting a payment type from a group consisting of a first payment type and a second payment type; and,

directing payment of the bill using the selected payment type.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the first payment type is an electronic funds transfer and the second payment type is selected from a group consisting of a draft and a check.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the step of selecting a payment type further includes the step of searching a database of merchant information, the database including an indicator of payment type corresponding to each of a plurality of merchants including the particular merchant.

4. The method of claim 3 wherein the indicator of payment type includes a merchant's bank routing number.

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1   5.   The method of claim 2 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of evaluating the amount of the bill to be paid.

1   6.   The method of claim 2 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing

3   a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial

4   institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the

5   deposit account number of the particular consumer, and the step of directing payment of the

6   bill includes the step of preparing a draft written on funds in the deposit account represented

7   by the identified deposit account number.

1   7.   The method of claim 2 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing

3   a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial

4   institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the

5   deposit account number of the deposit account of the particular consumer, and the step of

6   directing payment of the bill includes the step of initiating an electronic funds transfer of

7   funds in the deposit account represented by the identified deposit account number.

1   8.   The method of claim 7 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   further includes the step of searching a database of merchant information, the database

3   including a bank routing number corresponding to each of a plurality of merchants including

4   the particular merchant.

1   9.   The method of claim 1 wherein the step of directing payment of the

2   bill comprises the steps of:

3   searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing a respective

4   deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial institutions by a

5   plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the deposit account

6   number of the deposit account of the particular consumer; and

7   paying the bill from funds in a deposit account other than the deposit account

8   represented by the identified deposit account number.

1   10.   The method of claim 9 further comprising the step of:

2   transferring funds in the amount of the bill from the deposit account of the

3   particular consumer to the deposit account from which the bill payment was made.

11.   The method of claim 2 wherein the step of directing payment of the bill includes the step of preparing a check written on funds in a service provider's deposit account.

12.   The method of claim 2 wherein the step of directing payment of the bill includes the step of initiating an electronic funds transfer from funds in a service provider's account.

13.   The method of claim 1 further comprising the steps of:

determining if the request to pay the bill is a duplicate of a previous request; and,

terminating the request if the request is a duplicate request.

14.   A method of paying bills using a computer, comprising the steps of:

receiving an instruction to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf of a particular consumer;

searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the deposit account number of the deposit account of the particular consumer;

8   selecting a payment type; and,

9   directing payment of the bill by the type of payment selected from funds in

10   the identified deposit account.

1   15.   The method of claim 14 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of comparing the amount of the bill to be paid to a predetermined amount.

1   16.   The method of claim 14 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of identifying a payment type indicator associated with the particular

3   merchant.

1   17.   The method of claim 16 wherein the step of identifying a payment

2   type indicator associated with the particular merchant includes the step of searching a

3   merchant database having a payment type indicator associated with each of a plurality of

4   merchants including the particular merchant.

1   18.   The method of claim 14 further comprising the steps of:

2   receiving a deposit account number representing a deposit account maintained

3   at one of a plurality of associated financial institutions by a particular consumer;

4   storing the deposit account number in a database of deposit account numbers;

5   comparing a particular consumer's deposit account number in the deposit

6   account number database with the particular consumer's deposit account number in a

7   financial institutions database to determine if the consumer's deposit account number in the

8   deposit account number database is correct; and,

9   correcting the deposit account number if the deposit account number in the

10   deposit account number database is not correct.

1   19.   The method of claim 14 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   further comprises the step of selecting a payment type from a check written on funds in a

3   deposit account other than the deposit account represented by the identified deposit account

4   number, a draft written on funds in the deposit account represented by the identified deposit

5   account number, and an electronic funds transfer of funds in the deposit account represented

6   by the identified deposit account number;

1   20.   A method of electronically paying bills, comprising the steps of:

2   receiving a request to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf of a

3   particular consumer;

4   selecting a payment type from the group consisting of a draft, a check, and

5   an electronic funds transfer; and,

6   directing payment of the bill using the selected payment type.

1   21.   The method of claim 20 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   further includes the step of searching a database of merchant information, the database

3   including an indicator of payment type corresponding to each of a plurality of merchants

4   including the particular merchant.

1   22.   The method of claim 21 wherein the indicator of payment type

2   includes a merchant's bank routing number.

1   23   The method of claim 20 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of evaluating the amount of the bill to be paid.

1   24.   The method of claim 20 wherein the step of selecting a payment type

2   includes the step of searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing

3   a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial

4   institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the

5   deposit account number of the particular consumer, and the step of directing payment of the

6   bill includes the step of preparing a draft written on funds in the deposit account represented

7   by the identified deposit account number.

25. The method of claim 20 wherein the step of selecting a payment type includes the step of searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the deposit account number of the deposit account of the particular consumer and the step of paying the bill includes the step of initiating an electronic funds transfer of funds from the deposit account represented by the identified deposit account number.

26. The method of claim 25 wherein the step of selecting a payment type further includes the step of searching a database of merchant information, the database including bank routing numbers corresponding to each of a plurality of merchants including the particular merchant.

27. The method of claim 26 wherein the step of directing payment of the bill comprises the steps of:

searching a database having deposit account numbers, each representing a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated financial institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to identify the deposit account number of the deposit account of the particular consumer; and

7   paying the bill from funds in a deposit account other than the deposit account

8   represented by the identified deposit account number.

1   28.   The method of claim 27 further comprising the step of:

2   transferring funds in the amount of the bill from the deposit account of the

3   particular consumer to the deposit account from which the bill payment was made.

1   29.   An article of manufacture, comprising:

2   a computer readable medium; and

3   computer software stored on the computer readable medium, the computer

4   software comprising a set of instructions directing a computer to perform the steps of:

5   receiving a request to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf of

6   a particular consumer;

7   selecting a payment type; and,

8   directing payment of the bill using the selected payment type.

1   30.   An article of manufacture, comprising:

2   a computer readable medium; and

3   computer software stored on the computer readable medium, the computer

4   software comprising a set of instructions directing a computer to perform the steps of:

5   receiving an instruction to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf

6   of a particular consumer;

7   searching a database having deposit account numbers, each

8   representing a respective deposit account maintained at one of a plurality of associated

9   financial institutions by a plurality of consumers including the particular consumer, to

10 identify the deposit account number of the deposit account of the particular consumer;

11   selecting a payment type; and,

12   directing payment of the bill by the type of payment selected from

13 funds in the identified deposit account.

1   31.   A system for paying bills using a computer, comprising:

2   means for receiving a request to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf

3   of a particular consumer;

4   means for selecting a payment type; and,

5   means for directing payment of the bill using the selected payment type.

1   32.   The system of claim 31 wherein said means for selecting a payment

2   type comprises means for selecting a payment type from the group consisting of a draft, a

3   check, and an electronic funds transfer.

1 33.   A system for paying bills using a computer, comprising:

2   a communications apparatus for receiving a request to pay a bill of a particular

3 merchant on behalf of a particular consumer; and,

4   a computer processor operatively connected to the communications apparatus

5 for selecting a payment type and directing payment of the bill using the selected payment

6 type.

1   34.   A system for paying bills using a computer, comprising:

2   a communications switch operatively connected to a network for receiving

3 a request to pay a bill of a particular merchant on behalf of a particular consumer;

4   a computer processor operatively connected to the network for selecting a

5 payment type and directing payment of the bill using the selected payment type.

1   35.   The system of claim 34 wherein the payment type is an electronic

2 funds transfer and the computer processor is operatively connected to a second network in

3 communication with an automated clearing house for initiating payment of the bill by the

4 electronic funds transfer.

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